

“The Sun Is ZERO”

Light and Color as Principles of Structural Order

Dirk Pörschmann

ZERO was from the outset an open space of opportunity, and we were speculating with the visionary form of purity, beauty, and silence.¹

Günther Uecker

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, ZERO was one of the most active and best networked art movements among the neo-avant-gardes. With enormous artistic impetus, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Jean Tinguely, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker, Hermann Goepfert, Almir Mavignier, Christian Megert, Henk Peeters, Jan. J. Schoonhoven, Jesús Rafael Soto, Daniel Spoerri, and Herman de Vries – to name just a few of the dozens of artists involved with ZERO – extended the avant-garde efforts of the early 20th century. Distinguishing itself from Tachism, ZERO started in the cities Düsseldorf, Milan, Antwerp, Paris, and Arnheim and developed into a European movement that was able to build on the foundation of the achievements of Art Informel (dynamics in execution and the elimination of the painting’s boundaries) and establish new aspects of media and technique such as monochromatism, serial structures, light, and fire as direct artistic and elementary media for the production of images and virtual and real kinetics as artistic methods. ZERO was an open movement in the nature of a

¹ Günther Uecker, *Der leere Mensch* (1965), in: Günther Uecker, *Schriften. Gedichte, Projektbeschreibungen, Reflexionen*, ed. by Stephan von Wiese, Saint Gall 1979, p. 108.



Fig. 7.1: Cover ZERO magazine, No. 1, 1958.

project. Like-minded artists exhibited and worked together and published in their own publications (*Fig. 7.1*) and collaborated on artistic actions.² ZERO thus became an important intersection of ideas and inventions from which subsequent art movements could set off on their own artistic paths.

The art critic John Anthony Thwaites, who was born in England and lived in Germany after the war, quoted Piene in his essay “Reaching the Zero Zone” of 1962. Piene remarked to him

² See Johan Pas, *The Magazine Is the Massage. ZERO im Zine-Netzwerk der Neo-Avantgarde 1958–1963*, in: *4 3 2 1 ZERO*, ed. by Dirk Pörschmann and Mattijs Visser, Düsseldorf 2012, p. 469–86.

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of the essence of ZERO: “It’s not a style, it’s not a group. It’s not a movement. And I don’t want it to become one.” Thwaites asked what it was, and Piene replied: “A point of view.”³ This assessment of ZERO as a perspective and mentality coincides with the experience of Heinz Mack, who looking back in an interview by the art historian Stephan von Wiese described the situation as follows: “I found here [in Italy] – and earlier in France, Belgium, Holland – that similar things were happening in various places in Europe at the same time, that like an artesian well in one place [...] suddenly something came to light and manifested itself that had already occurred in my immediate circle and vice versa.”⁴ ZERO developed from the intersection of artistic interests. ZERO consisted of projects and experiments that did not take place in test tubes separated from the world but rather within a circle of like-minded people who were often friends as well. They asked similar questions about painting, art, and the world and came up with comparable answers in their pictorial inventions and reflections.

Reading the numerous manifestos, art theory texts, and reviews from the period, one is struck by the frequent use of the adjective ‘pure’ and the noun ‘purity’: striving for pure color in monochromatism, structures that are pure because they have been liberated from composition, light that is pure because it is seen only in terms of its energy value, elements that are pure because they are natural, and perception that is pure because it is freed of memory and any connection to concrete feelings.

³ John Anthony Thwaites, Reaching the Zero Zone, in: *arts magazine* 36, no. 10 (September 1962), p. 16–21, esp. p. 16.

⁴ Heinz Mack in conversation with Stephan von Wiese, ZERO and Azimut. Ein artesischer Brunnen, n.p., n.d., unpublished typescript in German, Archives of Stephan von Wiese, Berlin; published in Italian in: Udo Kultermann, *Zero, 1958–1968. Tra Germania e Italia*, exh. cat. Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea Siena, Milan 2004, p. 165–66.

In essence, it is the striving for pure art without ‘impurities’ of material, object, subject, or content that can be found in many works by ZERO and that is treated in the manifestos in various ways.

In the second issue of the artists’ journal *ZERO*⁵, which was published on October 2, 1958, by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene on the occasion of the eighth “Abendausstellung” in Düsseldorf, Piene published his groundbreaking text “On the Purity of Light”.⁶ This manifesto took up subject matter from a text published in the first issue of *ZERO* on April 24, 1958, “Color in Different Value Systems”, in which Piene emphasized that energy value and movement value – as opposed to the traditional value of light as illumination – were central to *ZERO*.⁷ In *ZERO 2*, Piene continued these ideas and began his discussion with a reference to the existential meaning of the energy for life and art inherent in light: “Light is the primary condition for all visibility. Light is the sphere of color. Light is the life-substance both of men and of painting.”⁸ Piene went on to offer a history of the highlights of light in painting from antiquity to contemporary Art Informel. He attributed to Art Informel, in contrast to the formal rigor of geometric abstract, the achievement of having rediscovered the aspects of movement and dynamic for the structure of the painting. Piene summarized, however: “The price of this victory was extraordinarily high: it was the

⁵ See Dirk Pörschmann, *ZERO bis unendlich. Genese und Geschichte einer Künstlerzeitschrift*, in: Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 *ZERO* (see note 2), p. 424–41.

⁶ Otto Piene, *On the Purity of Light* (1958), in: *ZERO*, ed. by Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, Cambridge, Mass., 1973; reprint of the three issues of the journal, p. 46–47.

⁷ Otto Piene, *Color in Different Values* (1958), in: Piene / Mack, *ZERO* (see note 6), p. 19–21, esp. p. 21.

⁸ Piene, *Purity of Light* (see note 6), p. 46.

renunciation of the concept of purity of color, a concept that, [...], was never completely realized. Color could not become pure because one indispensable condition had been overlooked: purity of light.”⁹ Otto Piene criticized Art Informel for having, in his view, reactivated the illusionary space of the painting that had been rejected by classic abstract modernism in order to achieve an increase in dynamics that he regarded positively. “Consequently, no dynamic continuum can be formed; an Informal work is only frozen movement, a report on movement that has occurred in the past.”¹⁰ After offering these theses critical of Art Informel, Piene switched to a perspective based on an aesthetics of reception in order to demonstrate that Art Informel is “an expression of a pessimism that with a melancholy matter-of-factness takes human misery for granted.”¹¹ After reflecting on the role of the artist, he continued: “Drabness of color is an expression of man’s own drabness, of drabness of consciousness in the broadcast sense, and it suggests this drabness to the spectator, too.”¹² In these formulations, Piene was addressing the generation of artists born around 1915, who became established before ZERO. He regarded them – as a consequence of the biographical turning point of the Nazi dictatorship, their active participation in the Second World War, and the fact that the end of the war came at the middle point of their lives – as more closely tied to memory and with coming to terms with it than the artists of the ZERO idea, who were born around 1930.¹³ Piene’s notions of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Otto Piene, cited from: Wieland Schmied (ed.), *Mack, Piene, Uecker*, exh. cat. Kestner-Gesellschaft Hannover, Hanover 1965, p. 8: “for the whole generation before us, the war and the earth were the crucial experience: earth, material, sand, clay . . . for them that was protection, security, world, it meant

drabness or drama are also found in Piet Mondrian: “The more the tragic diminishes, the more art gains in purity.”¹⁴

The last two paragraphs of his manifesto “On the Purity of Light” contain the quintessence of Piene’s discussion: “Purity of light, which creates pure color, which in turn is an expression of the purity of light, takes hold of all men with its continuous flow of rhythmic current between painting and observer; this current, under certain formal conditions, becomes a forceful pulse beat, total vibration.”¹⁵ Piene described reception as a process of transferring energy from the painting to the viewer, which is only made possible by the purity of light and color. “The energy of light emanating from the field of painting is converted mysteriously into the spectator’s vital energy.”¹⁶ He developed a phenomenological perspective for which his study of philosophy at the University of Cologne provided fertile ground.¹⁷ At

shelter in a hole in the earth, in trenches, in the shelter, the last housing in the frightful threats of the war. For those of us who only experienced the war on its margins this experience is no longer valid . . . or, to put it another way, the war and hence the earth were not our crucial experience. So we did not feel tied to the earth in our art; it is not important to us to bring its material to the canvas. What for? Our crucial experience is an age that dreams of astronomical, cosmonautical adventures, in which man is in a position to leave the earth, to overcome gravity. We are interested in light, we are interested in the elements, fire, air currents, the unlimited possibilities to design a better, brighter world.”

¹⁴ Piet Mondrian, Neo-Plasticism. The General Principle of Plastic Equivalence (1920), in: *Art in Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Malden, Mass., 2003, p. 289–91, esp. p. 289.

¹⁵ Piene, Purity of Light (see note 6), p. 47.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ By his own account, Piene studied the philosophers Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, and especially Nicolai Hartmann, whose aesthetic of value influenced Piene’s manifesto “Color in Different Values”. See Anna Lenz / Ulrike Bleiker Honisch (eds.), *Das Ohr am Tatort. Heinz-Norbert Jocks im Gespräch mit Gotthard Graubner, Heinz Mack, Roman Opalka, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker*, Ostfildern 2009, p. 98.

almost the same time as Piene, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty was working on his *L'œil et l'esprit* (translated as ‘Eye and Mind’), published in 1961, in which he described and analyzed the process of seeing with the eyes of a painter (Cézanne, Klee, among others). Merleau-Ponty also used the term “vibration”¹⁸, meaning an apparent movement, a “movement without displacement.”¹⁹ He regarded the eye as the central organ of knowing the world: “The eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul – the joyous realm of things and their god, the sun.”²⁰ Piene and many of the other ZERO artists in their daily work in the studio addressed such questions as: What do I see? How do I see? What does the viewer experience of my paintings? Can my works have an effect? Reflections on processes of perception and insights to be evoked are fundamental to ZERO.²¹ In his text Piene did not list the ‘formal conditions’ necessary for the aforementioned process of energy transfer.²² He did not say specifically how his paintings are produced in technical terms. He described and analyzed on a metalevel. He combined his historical and theoretical reflections on art, light, and processes of human perception in the second issue of ZERO with a black-and-white reproduction of an untitled grid painting – probably the monochrome

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, transl. by Carleton Dallery, in: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, ed. by James M. Edie, Evanston, Ill., 1964, p. 159–90, esp. p. 184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²¹ See also Dirk Pörschmann, *Beyond the Boundaries of Colour in the Realm of Boundless Being*, in: *Jef Verheyen. Le peintre flamant*, ed. by Dirk Pörschmann and Mattijs Visser, exh. cat. Langen Foundation Neuss, Brussels 2010, p. 67–79.

²² Piene, *Purity of Light* (see note 6), p. 47.

Fig. 7.2: Otto Piene, *Lichtkreis*, 1958, Stencil painting, Oil on canvas, Private collection.

Lichtkreis (translated as ‘Light circle’) of 1958 (Fig. 7.2).²³ The eighth “Abendausstellung”, at which *Lichtkreis* was very probably exhibited, was – like the second issue of *ZERO* – subtitled *Vibration*. One year earlier, on the occasion of the fourth “Abendausstellung”, Piene presented his first grid paintings to the public²⁴, and the positive reactions of fellow artists, critics, and attendees gave him the necessary (self-)confidence to flank the reception of these works with texts on art theory.²⁵

²³ See illustration in: *ZERO*, no. 2 (1958), p. 25, and in: Ante Glibota (ed.), *Otto Piene*, Paris 2011, p. 30.

²⁴ In two interviews by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Otto Piene reported in detail on the origins of the grid paintings; see Hans Ulrich Obrist (ed.), *Otto Piene. A Retrospective*, exh. cat. Mayor Gallery London, London 2012, p. 7–22.

²⁵ See Wolfgang Asholt, *ZERO-Manifeste, Erklärungen, Proklamationen und die historische Avantgarde*, in: Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 *ZERO* (see note 2), p. 487–97.

Piène concluded his manifesto by expressing an optimistic wish. He saw his art and that of ZERO as an opportunity to permit viewers to have an existential experience in the “realm of painterly beauty”²⁶: “The purity of light will enable painting to arouse pure feeling.”²⁷ Piène’s concept of ‘pure feeling’ can be compared to Yves Klein’s idea of ‘sensibilité’. Both men were concerned with perception freed of subject matter, objects, and memories, which could be ‘pure’ or ‘sensitive’ because it broke with the worldly and led to a weightless, sublime feeling of an existential connection to the cosmos. The philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher described in his polemical text “Über die Religion” (translated as ‘On Religion’) the religious feeling of connection to nature, which he believed to be innate, as the basis for the enlightened modern citizen emancipating himself from the institution of the church:

That first mysterious moment that occurs in every sensory perception, before intuition and feeling have separated, where sense and its objects have, as it were, flowed into one another and become one, [...] I know how indescribable it is and how quickly it passes away [...]. I lie on the bosom of the infinite world. At this moment I am its soul, for I feel all its powers and its infinite life as my own.²⁸

Yves Klein, whom Piène and Mack had known and admired since 1957, wrote the manifesto “My Position in the Battle between Line and Color” for the first issue of *ZERO*.²⁹ In it Klein referred to his exhibition “Yves: Propositions monochromes” of 1956 at the *Galerie Colette Allendy* and described how the

²⁶ Piène, Purity of Light (see note 6), p. 47.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion. Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and transl. by Richard Crouter, Cambridge, UK, 1996, p. 112–13.

²⁹ See *Heinz Mack to Yves Klein*, Düsseldorf, March 1958, Yves Klein Archives, Paris, Corr. 273, published in: Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 ZERO (see note 2), p. 412–13.

effect he hoped his monochrome paintings have: “What I expected from the public was this ‘moment of truth’ of which Pierre Restany spoke in his text for my exhibit. In feeling free to remove this impure external encumbrance and to achieve that degree of contemplation where art becomes full and pure sensibility.”³⁰ Yves Klein’s blue monochromes and his famous exhibition “Le vide” at the *Galerie Iris Clert* in spring 1958 convey a desire for a purity of color taken to the extreme and hence a reduction of artistic means. In addition to pure color, Klein also used the element of fire in his art. In his fire paintings, he, like Otto Piene, worked the canvas with fire. But unlike Piene, who ignited the paint directly on the canvas by using alcohol-based fixatives, Klein assailed the canvas with gas flames. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, whose books Klein read, dedicated the final chapter of his *Le psychanalyse du feu* to the relationship between fire and purity.³¹ In his exhibition “Yves Klein: Monochrome und Feuer” at the *Museum Haus Lange* in Krefeld in 1961, Klein exhibited fire sculptures that viewers found immensely fascinating.³² Bachelard’s ideas can be read as a clear commentary with a view to the presentation of gas flames:

“Let us consider now the region in which fire is thought to be pure. This region, it seems, is at the extreme limit, at the point of the flame, where color gives way to an almost invisible vibration. Then fire is dematerialized; it loses its reality; it becomes pure spirit.”³³

Purity, like beauty, is a quality attributed to people, things, and ideas, and, like the beautiful or ugly, both the pure and

³⁰ Yves Klein, My Position in the Battle between Line and Color, in: Piene / Mack, ZERO (see note 6), p. 10–11.

³¹ Gaston Bachelard, *La psychanalyse du feu*, Paris 1938.

³² See Sidra Stich (ed.), *Yves Klein*, exh. cat. Museum Ludwig Köln et al., Ostfildern 1994, p. 223–25.

³³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, transl. by Alan C. M. Ross, Boston 1964, p. 104.

the impure and dirty can be found in art. In relation to qualities of formal and aesthetic of subjects and objects, purity is described with categorizing adjectives that can be used as related in meaning to ‘clean’. From formal or semantic perspectives – and especially in the realm of morality – there are synonyms for ‘pure’ that function as predicates and whose meaning changes in different contexts: for example, ‘unspoiled’, ‘unadulterated’, ‘unmixed’, ‘flawless’, ‘clean’, ‘ordered’, ‘unambiguous’, ‘clear’, ‘untouched’, ‘innocent’, and ‘chaste’. In his *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, first published in 1899, the philosopher Rudolf Eisler aptly described the essential quality of ‘rein’ (pure) with clear references to Plato and Kant: “free of foreign additives that do not belong to the essence of a thing, of its very own nature.”³⁴

The desire for and the assessment of purity is a subjective phenomenon. Objective purity can be produced artificially in the laboratory but is never found in this absolute form in nature, art, culture, religion, or society. For the British social anthropologist Mary Douglas, who became famous well beyond the boundaries of her discipline for her ethnological treatise “Purity and Danger” of 1966³⁵, striving for purity can be explained by a need for order – that is, from the need to differentiate, categorize, and name plants, animals, people, things, phenomena, and events. People try to understand their surroundings in order to feel (supposedly) safe from the threateningly chaotic tendencies of the world. It represents the will to create a cosmos that appears to ‘function’ according to human rules.

The fundamental cultural and social upheavals that form the basis for the modern era have particularly encouraged the de-

³⁴ Art. “rein”, in: Rudolf Eisler (ed.), *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe*, 3 vols., Berlin 1910, vol. 3, p. 1187–89.

³⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, New York 1966.

sire for order in many spheres of human culture. This demand had been increasingly evident since Italian Futurism and the beginning of avant-garde movements in the visual arts as well that it marked. The viewers of such art and the attentive readers of art theory texts from the early and middle years of the 20th century will see that the desire for purity of art was particularly powerful during the decades of modernism. Numerous avant-garde artists demanded that the evolution of artistic abstractions should strive for a purity achieved by processes of concentration by ordering and reducing pictorial elements, materials, or ideas. The Futurist artists around Umberto Boccioni – like Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Robert Delaunay, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and László Moholy-Nagy later – expressed ambitions that clearly reflected a desire to give order to art they perceived as mixed and impure. Their intention was to have a positive effect on their influence on the viewer through art of ordered form and content.

In the United States, it was the artist and art theorist Ad Reinhardt who, in his essay “Art-as-Art” of 1962, regarded an “uncompromising ‘purity’ of art” as the most important principle of 20th-century art.³⁶ In his *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, published in 1957, Reinhardt proclaimed: “The first rule and the absolute measure of fine art, the highest and most sublime of the arts, is purity.”³⁷ As early as 1940 the art critic Clement Greenberg wrote in his essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon” on the development of abstract art:

³⁶ Ad Reinhardt, Art-as-Art, in: *Ad Reinhardt, Art-As-Art. The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. by Barbara Rose, New York 1975, p. 53–56, esp. p. 54.

³⁷ Ad Reinhardt, *Twelve Rules for a New Academy*, in: Rose, *Art-As-Art* (see note 36), p. 203–08, esp. p. 204.

Guiding themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, by a notion of purity derived from the example of music, the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. [...] Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. [...] For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.³⁸

It would be possible to cite many more statements by artists and theorists calling for a purity of art and developing their own ordering structures. But let us return to ZERO. Heinz Mack and Otto Piene concluded their poetic text “dynamo” published in the fourth issue of the artists’ journal *nota* in 1960, with the words: “purity: the disenchantment of the confused / the condition of painting.”³⁹ This jointly authored text reflects the intentions of both artists. Like Piene, Heinz Mack reflected intensely on his artistic work. Whereas the works and texts of Otto Piene, which follow in the tradition of German Romanticism, can be interpreted with the phenomenological theories of the 20th century⁴⁰, ‘structuralism’, which has been particularly influential in French philosophy, proves helpful for the work of Heinz Mack. Heinz Mack published his manifesto “The New Dynamic Structure” in *ZERO* 1. Mack preceded his text with three preliminary

³⁸ Clement Greenberg, Towards a Newer Laocoon (1940), in: Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1: *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. by John O’Brian, Chicago 1986, p. 23–38, esp. p. 32–33. See also: Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of The Avantgarde*, Cambridge 1968, p. 199–203.

³⁹ Heinz Mack / Otto Piene, dynamo, in: *nota. Studentische Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst und Dichtung*, no. 4 (1960), p. 3–5.

⁴⁰ See Dirk Pörschmann, Reine Momente der Klarheit. Otto Piene und die Idee Zero, in: *Otto Piene. Spectrum*, ed. by Nicole Grothe and Kurt Wettengl, exh. cat. Museum am Ostwall Dortmund, Dortmund 2008, p. 13–18.

remarks like the preamble of a deed or contract.⁴¹ In the very first of them he justified his reflections on art theory by emphasizing that they emerged from his work as a painter and that they would have to prove themselves daily in the studio even after he wrote them down. In the main text Mack then analyzed in great detail his ideas of a new painting, saying “that we must give up composition in favour of a simple structure zone.”⁴² He concluded with an emphatic call to arms: “The exclusiveness of a completely nonrepresentational, dynamic pictorial structure, [. . .], will be redeemed in a pure emotion. It will unveil a new reality, whose secret beauty we now only suspect.”⁴³ In order to achieve this, Mack described how the painter can use color so that “it fulfills its own unique creative function”⁴⁴ and with the help of a process of digression and approach to monochromaticism can arrive at a color structure that “when it strikes its own vibration; that is its life, its breath.”⁴⁵ In great detail Mack described his technique for producing a dynamic structure on a canvas. “The artistic method in this case is an open mechanical arrangement.”⁴⁶ The repetitive process is protected against the danger of perfection by the “sensitivity of the artist’s hands”⁴⁷ (*Fig. 7.3*). The artist recedes from the realm of composition but nevertheless preserves a final bastion of the subjective in manual labor. This is yet another process in which art is ordered in order to become purer. The mistrust of the humane qualities of people that had been excessively intensified by war and crimes

⁴¹ Heinz Mack, *The New Dynamic Structure*, in: Piene / Mack, *ZERO* (see note 6), p. 14–15, esp. p. 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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Fig. 7.3: Heinz Mack, *Untitled*, 1958, Oil on canvas, Collection of Viktor and Marianne Langen.

caused the painters and authors of the neo-avant-gardes to retreat ever further without seeing the danger inherent in such a strategy.⁴⁸ The need for express oneself as a painter in art theory

⁴⁸ See Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, transl. by Richard Howard, in: *Aspen*, nos. 5–6 (1967), n.p. See also Verena Krieger, *Sieben Arten, an der Überwindung des Künstlersubjekts zu scheitern. Kritische Anmerkungen zum Mythos vom verschwundenen Autor*, in: *Was ist ein Künstler? Das Subjekt*

or increasingly to document work in the studio in photographs or films is a reaction to the so-called elimination of the subject, which is found much more in works of Concrete art, Op Art, minimalism, and conceptual art than in ZERO. One explanation for that lies in the artistic origins of the artists of the ZERO movement, most of whom grew out of Art Informel.

Mack's oeuvre developed from painted dynamic structures by way of reflective metal reliefs and kinetic rotors that produce interference to expansive works that imagined and in some cases realizes in places free of civilizing interventions: for example, the *Sahara-Projekt*, conceived in 1958–59 and published in *ZERO* 3⁴⁹, or other projects in harsh environments entirely of water or ice.⁵⁰ Light playing with structure color or metal surfaces so that the material seems to be dematerialized is central to Mack's works and reflects his desire for beauty in art.⁵¹ "My metal reliefs, which I would rather call light reliefs, and which are formed by hand, only require light instead of color in order to come alive. [...] The potential beauty of such a work is a pure expression of beauty of light"⁵² (Fig. 7.4).

The French philosopher Roland Barthes, whose first major work, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, was published in Paris in 1953, described the activity of a structuralist author or artist like Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, or Günther Uecker especially well. For Bar-

der modernen Kunst, ed. by Martin Hellmold et al., Munich 2003, p. 117–48.

⁴⁹ Heinz Mack, *The Sahara Project*, in: Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 ZERO (see note 2).

⁵⁰ See Wieland Schmied, *Arbeit am Projekt der Moderne*, in: *Utopie und Wirklichkeit im Werk von Heinz Mack*, ed. by Wieland Schmied, Cologne 1998, p. 10–13, esp. p. 11.

⁵¹ See Ulrike Schmitt, „Our objects are going to float in space and will dynamically articulate the light. . .“ The immaterial in the works of the ZERO movement, in the present volume, p. 111–136.

⁵² Heinz Mack, *Resting Restlessness*, in: Piene / Mack, ZERO (see note 6), p. 40–41, esp. p. 41.

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Fig. 7.4: Heinz Mack, *Relief wall*, 1958–60, 31 elements, different sizes and materials, Galerie Diogenes, Berlin 1960.

thes, this form of creative “fabrication of a world which resembles the first one, not in order to copy it but to render it intelligible”⁵³, using two central operations: dissection and articulation.⁵⁴ In the work of the three artists just mentioned, dissection into points, lines, fields, or planes leads to serial structures in grid paintings, dynamic structures, or fields of nails. The process of production is more crucial for Barthes than the result of that production: “a serial composition or an analysis by Levi-Strauss are not objects insofar as they have been made; their present being is their past act.”⁵⁵ Meanings are produced but not

⁵³ Roland Barthes, *The Structuralist Activity* (1966), transl. by Richard Howard, in: Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory since Plato*, New York 1971, p. 1196–99, esp. p. 1197.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1198.

explained by the work or author: “like the ancient soothsayer, he [the artist, the analyzer] *speaks* the locus of meaning but does not name it.”⁵⁶

Serial structures such as the titled series of ZERO or the serial music of the likes of Karlheinz Stockhausen evolved, like structuralism itself, during the 20th century, in the era of mass production for a society in large cities. Postwar Europe’s rapid reconstruction was based on serially organized architecture whose roots lie in the Bauhaus of the 1920s. The world of commodities was dominated by mass-produced goods such as Coca-Cola, the VW Beetle, and the Renault 2CV, and even the development of a democratic society in Germany led to the understanding that the individual thrives, not perishes, in the equality in freedom that is granted by the constitution with no loss of individual difference. The serially ordered is found in many spheres of society and not just among national armies. Mack, Piene, and Uecker, who, like most of the active or passive participants in the Second World War, bore internal or external scars, found their personal place of liberation from the traumatic past in the repetitive activity of their artistic creativity. It was not through conscious, analytical, and hence past-oriented work that they found freedom in the art generated from “purity, beauty, and silence”⁵⁷ but through a structuralist activity that works unconsciously, forgets, and points to the future. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard placed memory and repetition in a context that enables us to interpret the differences between the generation of Art Informel and the ZERO artists stated at the beginning of this essay:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See the quotation from Uecker in the epigraph to the present text.

forwards. Repetition, if it is possible, thus makes a person happy, while recollection makes him unhappy.⁵⁸

Günther Uecker, who worked closely with Mack and Piene on the ZERO project from the time he participated in the presentation of ZERO 3 in 1961⁵⁹, had, as a result of his experiences from two German dictatorships and his training begun in East Germany, a less idealistic and much more realistically practical notion of purity in the sense of order and structure. For Uecker, this is the structure of order he created with nails and the color white in order to capture light and shadow (*Fig. 7.5*). Two quotations from Uecker illustrate his ideas of structure, color, and light:

My attempt to activate a real space by aligning structures and to make it possible to experience it as a state of the purity of objective aesthetic led me to new means of design. [...] What concerns me is achieving by these means a vibration in their ordered relationship to each other that disturbs their geometric order and can vex them.⁶⁰

Thus with this nail I catch the surrounding color from the light. This color has its differentiation of color within the ur-phenomenon of light; it is made clear by the medium, by the carrier, by the reflector within – as is possible in music – a score and hence legible in certain organizational relationships.⁶¹

In numerous statements Günther Uecker repeatedly emphasized that in addition to the desire for a pure, ordered, and intact world it was necessary to be aware of impure, chaotic, and

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition, and Philosophical Crumbs*, transl. by M. G. Piety, Oxford, UK, 2009, p. 3.

⁵⁹ See Tiziana Caianiello, Ein Klamauk mit weitreichenden Folgen. Die feierliche Präsentation von ZERO 3, in: Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 ZERO (see note 2), p. 511–26.

⁶⁰ Günther Uecker, Die Schönheit der Bewegung, in: Uecker, Schriften (see note 1), p. 105.

⁶¹ Günther Uecker, Die Einnagelung ins Bewusstsein. Interview mit Rolf-Gunter Dienst, in: Uecker, Schriften (see note 1), p. 126–34, esp. p. 129.

Fig. 7.5: Günther Uecker, *Objekt Weiss*, 1961, Oil and nails on canvas, Collection of Viktor and Marianne Langen.

bloody realities. This is a dialectical view that has shaped Western philosophy and culture. Uecker, like Mack, has studied Zen intensely in order to achieve an understanding and experience of totality in the isolation of modern humans and as a counter to the dominant theories of dualisms. Piene's *Ways to Paradise*⁶² move via an intensely experienced perception of nature that connects the artist to the cosmos – mediated by his eye:

⁶² Otto Piene, *Ways to Paradise* (1961), in: Piene / Mack, ZERO (see note 6), quoted in Pörschmann / Visser, 4 3 2 1 ZERO (see note 2).

“The Sun Is ZERO”

One glance at the sky, at the sun, at the sea, is enough to show that the world outside man is bigger than that inside him, that it is so immense that man needs a medium to transform the power of the sun into an illumination which is suitable to him, into a stream whose waves are like the beating of his heart. Pictures are no longer dungeons, where mind and body are shackled together, but mirrors whose powers affect man, streams, freely pouring forth into space, not ebbing but flooding.⁶³ (Fig. 7.6)

Fig. 7.6: Otto Piene, *Schwarze Sonne*, 1962/63, Oil and smoke on canvas, Vervoordt Foundation.

For all three artists – as for most of the protagonists of ZERO – the medium of light became a key to knowledge on the basis of artistic experiments with color, fire, smoke, artificial light, nails, metal surfaces, plastics, mirrors, and lenses. In the work of the ZERO artists, light became a metamedium used to create

⁶³ Ibid.

order in colors and structures and with the natural elements fire, water, and air to exhibit in empty spaces untouched by civilization where it can reveal itself. After the darkness of the war, light brought hope in art, in a way familiar to any traveler waiting for the dawn in a dark and unfamiliar foreign place.

The *Bauhaus* artist László Moholy-Nagy, whose early experiments with light and perception processes became an important confirmation for ZERO, wrote the following poem in 1917, at the age of twenty one. He had been severely injured serving in the Austrian-Hungarian army on the Russian front and was in a military hospital. His second wife, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, commented on this: “Between fever deliriums he wrote the creed of his life.”⁶⁴

Learn to know the Light-Design of your life.
You will find it different from chronology.
A different measure, called Eternitas,
Proud battle for the secrecy of order.
[...]
Search desperately – what is Light as essence?
What is its substance, what its price?
I cannot kill my thirst nor even lessen it.
Space, time and system – essence or mere chaos.
Realities that seem eternal
For creatures not eternal, bound by death.
Light, ordering Light, where are you? Far away.
A luster that illuminates mere being.
Come over me, proud Light, fierce Light, burn deep,
Ferocious Light, spread through me, cleanse my eyes.
[...]⁶⁵

(translated by Steven Lindberg)

⁶⁴ Cf. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy / Walter Gropius (eds.), *Moholy-Nagy. Experiment in Totality*, New York, 1950, p. 11.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

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- Fig. 7.1–7.6: Source: ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf
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